

## Stumbling in the Word: A Call to Godly Maturity

James 3: 1-4

It's interesting to be a parent when your kid is learning to walk. Sure, it's cute when they're rolling around on the floor, and even when they pull themselves up on the side of a chair or a table, but when they start to motivate around the room hanging on to the edge of the furniture, that's when things change really quickly.

Like most parents, we went a little overboard. We started taping up padding on all the table corners, moved all the sharp knives off the counters, plugged up the electrical sockets, put locks on the cabinets ... and all that is well and good.

Yet in the end, all we could really do as parents was remove the obstacles that might prevent our child from learning to walk.

In many ways, learning to walk is really the very first thing a parent has to let the child learn on their own. We can't do it for them. *They* have to learn to stand up, *they* have to learn balance, *they* have to learn how to keep upright as they move those legs forward.

*They* also have to learn how to get back up and keep walking when they fall down.

In a similar way, James is like a dad watching their kid bounce around the room. Sometimes joyful, sometimes wincing, but always watching us moving. In this passage, he'll give us three points, three motivators, to remind us of the direction we're supposed to be aiming - and some encouragement along the way. You'll see these points on your bulletin, have a look with me on the right hand side as James tells us firstly in verse 2 that:

### **1) Mature Christians Walk**

Next, diving further into verses 2 and 3 show us that

### **2) Mature Christians Talk**

and James' third point, from verses 1 and 2 give us the reminder of how:

### **3) Mature Christians Testify - whether they know it or not!**

So let's recap a little bit from last time. James begins today's section by covering the thing he spent two chapters stressing - we are all sinners. Sinners in thought, sinners in act, sinners in intent and sinners in full.

*"We all stumble in many things."*

James would remind us at the very start that we must place no hope in our actions for 'earning' righteousness in God's sight. However, as he explained in chapter 2, the righteousness of God in us, the Holy Spirit working through us, these will propel us and motivate us to good works in Christ. These overflowings of Christian charity will become more regular, more effective and and more bountiful as we continue in Christ.

Yet today, James wants us to focus on a particular skill we must develop. As he continues, we learn our first point in verse 2, you'll see it on your outline on the right hand side, read along as we find:

## **1) Mature Christians walk**

Verse 2 says:

*“If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man,  
able also to bridle the whole body.”*

First, let's not miss how this passage is hand-in-hand beside Paul's letter to the Romans, as Pastor Pat has been showing us. Recall in Romans 8:3 and 4 that, through Christ's atoning death on the cross, God the Father has:

*“... condemned sin in the flesh,  
that the righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us,  
**who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”***

Just as Paul speaks of our walking in the Spirit,

James here is also speaking of not “stumbling” in that same walk.

That word means to trip and fall down - it's a big, embarrassing face-plant, right down into the gravel and everyone sees it. Can you relate?

We see the word “stumble” and we think of a little “trip” on the sidewalk, as if our foot caught on the edge of the rug, but no, that's not what this word is. In Jesus' time, this was a word used to mean “to fall into misery, to become wretched.” To stumble is a serious thing - it's not a little ‘tripping.’

So there is harsh honesty here - but there is also great hope.

We must grasp this from the outset before we can understand what James is telling us in the next verses. It's so important to him that he begins this section with the cold fact that:

*"We all stumble in many things."*

We all fail - miserably! For two chapters now, James has pulled back the curtain, held up the mirror of truth and shown us how we are selfish, we are ungrateful, we are inconsiderate, we are discriminatory, we are spiteful and we are all sorts of other things. Things that we, ourselves, truly know about ourselves - and God knows them too.

We all stumble, we all fail, we all fall, in many things.

Yes, James gives us honesty - but also hope -

*"... if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you."* (Romans 8:9)

You see, James wants us to come into this with nowhere to hide.

This is because he's about to be dishing out some strong Biblical meat, and he knows we won't be able to chew it if we're thinking 'we aren't as bad as all that.'

If we're kidding ourselves about the strength of our own sinful nature, a nature that made the apostle Paul cry out:

*"Oh! Wretched man that I am!"* ,

and if we have doubts about the overwhelming power of Christ to save His people from all sin,  
to the uttermost,

...then we aren't going to understand what James is about to unpack -  
... and we certainly won't believe it.

you see, if we won't believe what the Lord has promised us,  
if we won't believe what Christ Himself has told us,  
then we aren't going to move forward to do those things God commands of us,  
we aren't going to step out when the Spirit in us tells us "Go forth!"  
we aren't going to get moving, much less run the race,  
because we're like children, so afraid to fall that we won't even try to stand up.

But Mature Christians **Walk**.

"We all stumble" - but through Christ, and by Christ and in Christ, we keep walking -  
because we believe the One who guides us.

*"The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD,  
and He delights in his way.  
Though he fall,  
he shall not be utterly cast down,  
for the LORD upholds him with His hand."* (Psalm 37:23-24)

Matthew Henry speaks about this, we've put it in your bulletin in blue on the right hand side.

Maybe you'll snip it out and keep it as a reminder - one we often need. Henry says, and I quote:

“A good man may be in distress,  
his affairs embarrassed, his spirits sunk,  
but *‘he shall not be utterly cast down.’*  
**God** shall be the strength of his heart  
when *his* flesh and heart fail  
and will uphold him with His comforts  
so that the spirit He has made  
shall not fail before him!”

What’s this mean for us?

Well, one application we can get right from the start is the reminder, straight from the Scriptures,  
that

**Correction - even (or especially!) harsh correction - is of the Lord - and should be  
welcomed as part of our maturing walk.**

I’ll repeat that, (repeat)

Proverbs 15:10 says bluntly:

*“He who hates correction will die,”*

but Hebrews tells us the incredible truth that the Lord’s chastening is:

*“...for our profit,*

*that we may be partakers of His holiness.”* (Heb 12:10)

Did you catch that not-so-hidden promise there?

Do you long to partake in the holiness of God?

Would you drink deep from that cup?

He's just told you how.

Bend down on that knee and get under that rod!

Proverbs 3:11 says:

*"Do not despise the chastening of the LORD,*

*nor detest His correction,*

*For whom the LORD loves, He corrects,*

*Just as a father the son in whom he delights."*

and that actually points out James' second application, the other half of that thing which James would have us know, write it down, it's this:

**We are the Sons and Daughters of God.**

Do you truly understand this yet?

I don't mean this in some floaty, empty ecumenical phrase, such as

"all are God's children,"

no, Family, all are *\*not\** God's children,

as we have **just** heard from Romans 8:9,

*"... if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His,"*

but that is not You, no,

of you it is said:

*“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed **upon us**,  
that **we** should be called*

*(we should be ‘named,’ we are identified and known as)*

*‘the children of God.’ “ (1 John 3:10)*

Of you and of all believers, Jesus Himself says:

*“I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you.” (John 14:18)*

Now orphans have no father,

but Christ has just told you He’s taking care of that personally,

so whatever your name is now - Smith, Jones, Lohse, McKinney -

well, you can forget that

because Jesus says of His overcomers, of His Family, He says

*“I will write on him My new Name,”*

so

*“He who has an ear,*

*let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 3:12-13)*

and get up! God:

*“... raises the poor from the dust,*

*and lifts the beggar from the ash heap*

*to set them among princes*

*and make them inherit the throne of glory.” (1 Sam 2:8)*

That's your Father.

And for one moment, think about this:

Think about what an incredible, monumental thing it is  
for the actual blood brother of Jesus Christ  
to be reminding you  
that you are in the family  
because his brother  
paid for your adoption  
by that same blood.

**We are the sons and daughters of God.**

Do we believe it?

When we believe mighty things about our mighty God - our heavenly Father - we'll be able to  
walk so as to not stumble.

From that launch pad, James gets straight into our schooling with verse 2 - we read again:

*"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man..."*

and this brings up his second point, look on your bulletin and see that:

## **2) Mature Christians talk**

James is talking about our speech - and we will get into that with great detail as we move through this passage - but before that, we first need to defuse a Bible land mine that can cause despair and despondency for a believer.

See, if you're like me, you come across that word:

“perfect”

And you say to yourself:

“I could never be perfect. Pat's just gone through Romans 7 showing how Paul himself knows how 'wretched' he is - what hope then do I have of being 'perfect?' “

Take heart! Because this word does not mean what you think it means.

We see “perfect” and we imagine:

A “perfect” score on a test, yes? 100%! No wrong answers!

Boy, how many of us learned that lesson, year after year in school?

How proud we were to show that grade to our parents!

How disappointed we felt when we came home with that failing grade!

Or maybe we think of a “perfect” piece of art, like Michaelangelo's famous sculpture of 'David.'

No flaws, nothing out of place - a thing of beauty, a joy to behold.

But this word here, *teleios*,  
hear this well, get it in your head,  
*this* word does not mean *that*.

This word, put plainly, means: 'a grown-up.'

An adult.

In fact, it's the very word used in that passage from Hebrews 5 where it says:

*"... you have come to need milk and not solid food!*

*... for everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness,  
for he is a babe.*

*But solid food belongs to those who are **of full age...***"

See, what we have here, brothers and sisters, is James discipling the church so that they'll be grown men and women of faith - and this takes hard truths. It takes falls and bruises and painful experience.

So when James says in verse 2 that:

*"...if anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man,"*

one thing he is most definitely saying is that you and I are expected to let the Holy Spirit affect and direct your speech. It's expected of believers as they grow in Christ.

Paul agrees and even uses this very point as an example of Christian maturity.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, he says:

*"When I was a child, I spoke as a child,  
I understood as a child,  
I thought as a child;  
but when I became a man,  
I put away childish things."* (1 Cor 13:11)

Did you notice how those childish things must be "*put away?*"

That's the task and duty of an adult. That's our job!

**That** is one thing James is telling us there - he's telling us that we must strive to handle our words with maturity.

Later in this chapter, we'll get to hear some practical examples, and we'll dive down into those next time - they are rich in exhortation and application for us and deserve our special attention.

But one reason James waits to give those examples is because he first needs us to understand both the nature of our speech and what a powerful and controlling influence it has on us.

This influence comes at us from two distinct directions. We see the first example in verses 2 and 3:

(read 2 and 3)

Verse 3 in particular gives us three things to take note of.

First, notice that the horse gets a bit put in its mouth.

Is everyone familiar with a bit?

(show the bit from Beth)

It's basically a wide metal bar that goes sideways into the horse's mouth, and there's rings on each end for the reins.

Now as Beth and Roy and John can probably tell you,

by this stage, the horse has had some training in learning to follow direction.

Maybe a riding crop, a gentle type of whip, gave the horse a little sting to nudge it one way or another.

Maybe a little kick with a spur let the horse know the rider was serious about turning left.

But in every case, the horse has learned that the bit was a more gentle way to learn how it was supposed to go.

Now note the second thing from verse 3, the fact that the bit is in place so that the horse obeys the rider.

The natural inclination of the horse is to run where it wishes, but with a bit and bridle in place, the horse does what the *rider* wishes.

And thirdly in verse 3, we see that the the bit is in place so that the rider may turn the whole body in the direction **He** wishes it to go.

In this illustration, see how the subject is internal!

That unruly animal is our conversation - the way we talk - and we are to be the rider.

Consider Ephesians 4:29:

*“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth,  
but what is good for necessary edification,  
that it may impart grace to the hearers.”*

Now James continues and shows the other direction - read along with me in verse 4:

(read v4)

We should pay special attention to that phrase:

*“... driven by fierce winds...”*

Fierce! *Skleros*, meaning ‘harsh,’ ‘offensive,’ intolerable.’

See how **this** influence is **external** - and with the amplifying effect of that word, it’s easy to see

James’ point:

Consider how harsh or offensive external conditions can steer our conversation.

Political, social or moral issues have all of us raw.

Some may be spoiling for an argument while others might be compromising in order to avoid one. James says both are:

*"...driven by fierce winds..."*

... but an experienced navigator knows how to steer their vessel safely through the tempest.

Paul echoes this theme of James' - again in Ephesians 4 - as he says in verse 14:

*" ... that we should no longer be children,*

*tossed to and fro*

*and carried about with every wind of doctrine,*

*by the trickery of men,*

*in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.... "*

James tells us in these verses that our tongue would run away from us, and also that we ourselves can expect to weather some fierce storms from outside, so we'd better get our hand on that tiller and get used to sailing in these waters.

That's actually our next point of application, it's a very simple statement but James wants us to understand the important truth that:

**Our Talk controls our Walk.**

(repeat)

You see, when James says in verse 2 that the mature Christian is that one in control of their conversation

- in control of their reaction to both inside impulses as well as outside circumstances -

James says **that** believer is "*able also to bridle the whole body,*"

and that means

**Our Talk controls our Walk.**

This brings us to our last point from James. It's the point he made from the very beginning, read on your outline with me as we'll see how:

### **3) Mature Christians testify (whether they know it or not)**

Head back up and read along with me - in verses 1 and 2, James gives us a warning against hypocrisy as he says:

*"Let not many of you become teachers,  
knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."*

The King James says "*we shall receive the greater condemnation,*" and that's certainly in line with where James has gone in today's passage.

Our lives are testimony, and nothing makes that more apparent than the words we speak. There are so many examples of ministries that were toppled down in public when the private sins of their teacher came to light. That catastrophic stumble, yes?

Yet we are called to testify - to go out and contend for Christ!

In Colossians 4:5-6, Paul says:

*“Walk in wisdom **toward** those who are outside,  
redeeming the time.  
Let your speech always be with grace,  
seasoned with salt,  
that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”*

James says the teachers - those who are explaining Godly things to God's people - receive the stricter judgment because he knows that human failings can cause failing humans to disregard the gospel call.

Worse yet,

an unbeliever or even an immature Christian can and will look on our public failing as reason and evidence that sin is actually acceptable in God's sight.

1 Corinthians 8:12:

*“When you thus sin against the brethren,  
and wound their weak conscience,*

*you sin against Christ.”*

Now James includes himself as he reminds us:

*“We all stumble in many things.”*

But:

when **our** failings cause **another** to stumble,

when **our** hypocrisy makes shipwreck of **another** believer’s faith,

then we have that stricter judgment, that greater condemnation

Christ himself rightly says of us:

*“Offenses must come - but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”* (Matthew 18:7)

That word - “offenses” - is *skandalon* - yes, that’s how we get the word “scandal!”

Immediately after pronouncing this woe, the Lord shows how seriously He takes this issue.

Listen as Jesus prescribes a most severe remedy:

*“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off, and cast it from you!*

*It is better for you to enter life lame or maimed, rather than*

*- having two hands or two feet -*

*to be cast into the everlasting fire.”* (Matthew 18:8)

*“We shall receive the greater condemnation.”*

This condemnation, like those fierce winds, comes from two directions.

Condemnation from the world, as Paul says in Romans 2:

*“You who make your boast in the law -*

*do you dishonor God through breaking the law?*

*for ‘the Name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you!’*

*- as it is written.” (v23-24)*

And condemnation from the Lord, as Christ the Judge has said:

*“For every idle word men may speak,*

*they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment.” (Mt 12:36)*

The Scriptures tell us to :

*“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith.*

*Test yourselves!*

*Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” 2 Cor 13:5*

Have we forgotten that?

Have we forgotten - that we are the sons and daughters of God?

Have we forgotten - that desire of new faith when we wished we were steadfast and confident?

Have we forgotten - who waits to pour holiness out upon us?

Our lives are indeed a testimony - whether we know it or not!

In closing, as an application, James' message is issuing us some challenges which we can put into practice, and the first one is this:

**\* Recognize when the world would have you react - and prayerfully refrain.**

Proverbs 15:28 tells us

*“The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,  
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.”*

So challenge yourself!

Ask the Lord to guide you to and through at least one instance this week -  
a situation where you see how those fierce winds of the world are blowing;  
and then ask for the sight to sail through and the faith to stand fast.

See what He will do for you in that time of trial!

A last application, or challenge, is this:

**\* Ask the Lord to clean house.**

Psalm 139 says:

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart.*

*Try me, and know my anxieties.*

*And see if there is any wicked way within me.”*

Ask God to send the Holy Spirit through with a flashlight and flush out those dark corners!

The Scriptures tell us how:

James says:

*“Confess your trespasses to one another,  
and pray for one another,  
that you may be healed.” (5:16)*

Paul in Ephesians adds:

*“ ... be kind to one another,  
tenderhearted,  
forgiving one another,  
even as God in Christ forgave you.” (4:32)*

And reach out to each other:

*“Brethren, if any man is overtaken in any trespass,  
you who are spiritual  
restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness  
(considering yourself, lest you also are tempted)  
Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal 6:1-2)*

And finally -

Maybe you’re hearing this and you don’t know Christ -

But maybe you know the weight of sin,

the strain of it,

the stain of it,

the feeling of knowing that you'll never be able to make yourself acceptable,

that, on your own, you're unworthy of the love and favor of God?

You're right, you know.

All of God's people have known your despair!

We have all been crushed under that certain knowledge that:

*" ... your iniquities have separated you from your God*

*and your sins have hidden his face from you,*

*so that He will not hear."* (Is 59)

But God!

*"But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that,*

*while we were still sinners,*

*Christ died for us.*

*For if!*

*If, when we were enemies,*

*we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,*

*much more - having been reconciled -*

*we shall be saved by His life."* (Romans 5:8, 10)

If you would be clean,

if you would throw your heavy burden down  
and find grace and favor in the sight of God,  
then bow your head, drop to your knees  
and call on Christ to make good that promise,  
to apply it to your account, in your heart and soul,  
and grab hold of the free gift of the God the Father  
freely offered to all who would believe  
unto a new and eternal life in Christ.

Because "*we all stumble - in many things!*"

But through Christ, we rise up and step forward -

...because Mature Christians Walk

and Mature Christians Talk

and Mature Christians Testify

that in Christ, all things are made new -

including us!

Amen?

Hymn 1: 433: Rise Up, O Church of God

Hymn 2: 347: And can it be that I should gain / Amazing Love

Hymn 3: 571: Trust and Obey